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Author(s): S. P. Brock

Source: *Numen*, Vol. 20, Fasc. 1, (Apr., 1973), pp. 1-19

Published by: BRILL

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3269655>

Accessed: 26/06/2008 10:07

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EARLY SYRIAN ASCETICISM ¹⁾

BY

S. P. BROCK

Cambridge, England

I begin with two quotations:

"Incomprehensible! he is the son of respectable upper middle class parents, with a good education, and excellent prospects for a steady comfortable life, yet he has left home and gone off to join a lot of dirty vagrants."

"Sell all your belongings. Anyone of you who does not abandon all his possessions cannot be my disciple. If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, brothers and sisters, wife and children, even his own self, he cannot be a disciple of mine; and he who does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be a disciple of mine. You do not belong to the world."

The first, slightly adapted, quotation are the words, not, as one might think, of dismayed parents of a twentieth-century teenager who has deserted his parental home and way of life, and exchanged it for that of a hippy commune; rather, they represent the sort of thing that parents in Antioch in the 380s were saying when their sons left home and ran off to the desert to join the monks there ²⁾). It was in answer to complaints such as these that John Chrysostom, then still a deacon, wrote, sometime between 383 and 386, his treatise "Against the detractors of the monastic life".

The second quotation, or set of quotations, are of course from the New Testament ³⁾, and they represent the chief sayings of Jesus on the subject of discipleship—sayings which served as the starting point, and justification, for the way of life of the early ascetics.

In all ages, those who enjoy comfortable and secure positions in life have found it difficult, if not impossible, to understand why someone, in whose power it was to benefit from the same type of life, should instead choose to throw it all up, in exchange for an alternative that

1) Paper read at a colloquium on 'Asceticism in the Early Byzantine World', held at the University of Birmingham, England, 19th-20th March, 1971.

2) *P.G.* xlvii, col. 321 (middle).

3) Luke xii 33; xiv 33, 26; John xv 19. I quote from the Old Syriac version.

appears to them at best incomprehensible, at worst, downright perverse. Now there are of course very obvious differences, most notably in motivation, between the fourth and fifth century "drop-outs" from society and their modern counterparts, but since the "ascetic movement" in Syria—in particular in its more extreme manifestations—is one that is especially hard for twentieth century man to comprehend, even an imperfect parallel, such as the one I have drawn, can be helpful in the effort to understand what is to us such an alien phenomenon.

Movements can often best be understood in terms of reactions against some aspect of contemporary society, and, just as the idealism of modern aspirants to an "alternate society" has largely been motivated by disgust at the materialistic affluence of the post-war society they live in, so that of their fourth century counterparts was, to some extent at least, the product of a reaction against the degradation of the quality of Christian life after the last persecutions had ceased. As we shall see, the ascetic is in many ways the successor of the martyr. To the early church the martyr represented an ideal, and after the end of the persecutions, when this ideal was no longer attainable, it was replaced by that of the ascetic, whose whole life was in fact often regarded in terms of a martyrdom⁴), and it is very significant that much of the terminology used in connection with ascetics, such as "contest", "athlete" and so on, was previously applied to martyrs. In the case of the ascetic the human persecutor has simply been replaced by a spiritual, that is to say, demonic, counterpart. Moreover, if one sees the ascetics of the fourth century onwards as heirs to the martyrs, it helps one to realise why they regarded their way of life as simply carrying on the norm of Christian life in pre-Constantinian times⁵), when to be a Christian was usually a matter of real seriousness.

It is important to understand this sense of continuum back to the

4) Cf. T. J. Lamy, *Sancti Ephraemi Syri Hymni et Sermones*, IV, cols. 215/6: "Teach your body the martyrdom that consists in mortification"; compare also A. Vööbus, *Literary Critical and Historical Studies in Ephrem the Syrian* (Stockholm, 1958), pp. 105-6. At the same time asceticism was regarded by several early writers as a training for martyrdom; thus, notably, Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* (G. C. S., Origenes I), xi, xxi, etc. (on which see S. T. Bettencourt, *Doctrina Ascetica Origenis*, (*Studia Anselmiana* xvi, 1945), pp. 120 ff); Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, § 47. For this theme in general, see E. E. Malone, "The Monk and the Martyr", *Studia Anselmiana* xxxviii (1956), pp. 201-28; H. Musurillo, in *Traditio* xii (1956), pp. 55-62.

5) Cf. L. Bouyer, *La vie de saint Antoine* (Paris, 1950), pp. 9-10.

earliest church that the ascetics of the fourth century had, for only when this is in mind can one appreciate properly the indigenous character of Syrian asceticism. Now if one looks at some of the sources which purport to deal with the fourth century Syrian ascetics, one is in fact given the impression that Egypt was the ultimate source of inspiration for the ideal of the ascetic—very often, of course, synonymous with monastic—life. Thus, for example, according to a large number of Syriac sources monasticism was introduced into Syria and Mesopotamia by disciples of Pachomius, notably a certain Mar Awgen. A closer scrutiny, however, throws up the remarkable fact that Mar Awgen is never mentioned in any source, Syriac or Greek, that can be dated earlier than about the ninth century⁶). It thus becomes apparent that later Syrian monks were prepared to forget their genuinely native heritage under the influence of the immense prestige that Egyptian monasticism gained, through works like Palladius' *Paradise* (well known in Syriac).

In point of fact, the fourth and fifth century ascetics of Syria, who are so well described by Theodoret in his *Historia Religiosa*, were heirs to a remarkable native ascetic tradition that went back to the very beginnings of Christianity. Let us take a look at some of the manifestations of this ascetic tradition. My first example is taken from the Gospel that has traditionally been associated with Antioch, that attributed to Luke. From a very early date the Beatitudes were regarded as providing a paradigm of Christian conduct, and if one compares the two forms in which the first beatitude has been handed down in Matthew and Luke⁷), one at once notices a very significant difference of emphasis: Matthew has "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven", while in Luke the poverty is made external: "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven". A similar shift in emphasis can be seen in the second of Luke's series: here the corresponding words in Matthew read: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled". In Luke, however,

6) Cf. S. Jargy, "Les origines du monachisme en Syrie et en Mésopotamie", *Proche Orient Chrétien* ii (1952), pp. 110-25; A. Vööbus, "The Origins of Monasticism in Mesopotamia", *Church History* xx (1951), pp. 27-37, and in his *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, I (C.S.C.O., Subsidia 14; 1958), pp. 145-6, 217 ff.; J. M. Fiey, in *Analecta Bollandiana* lxxx (1962), pp. 52-81.

7) Matthew v 3; Luke vi 20.

the hunger is no longer metaphorical: "Blessed are those who hunger now, for you shall be filled". Before leaving the Beatitudes it might be added that it is an interesting observation that several of the names given to ascetics by early Syriac writers are drawn from this source ⁸).

Already in the Gospels we can in fact see two different reactions to the realization that riches *can* be a hindrance to discipleship. What one might term the 'liberal' answer to this problem is to consider a simple warning sufficient, while the 'ascetic' one—which is found very obviously implied in Luke's parable of the Rich man and Lazarus—is to demand actual renunciation of the riches, so as to avoid any danger that they *might* prove a hindrance ⁹).

The Gospel sayings stress four different aspects of discipleship: a follower of Christ should have no material possessions, or fixed abode; he should break with his family, and he must bear his daily cross. Two important areas where one might expect some ascetic teaching to be involved are, however, neglected: I mean in matters of food and marital life. On neither of these points is any clear guidance to be found in the Gospels, although from Paul's correspondence one can see that these were urgent problems in the nascent Christian communities. On the matter of food, Paul advocated a freedom that was to be modified only out of consideration for the views of the spiritually weaker members of the community. It is clear nevertheless, that others thought very differently on this subject, and, since religious regulations about foods were common in both the Graeco-Roman and the Jewish traditions, those familiar with them wanted to read them into, or even impose them on, the Gospels. Thus Marcion, whose followers, incidentally, were very numerous in Syria and Mesopotamia ¹⁰), could not believe that in the Lord's Prayer Jesus had taught men to be so materialistic as to pray for their daily food, and so he altered the pronoun 'our' to 'thy': "Give us this day *thy* daily bread". A related case concerns the diet of John the Baptist. It has long been recognised

8) On the popularity of the Beatitudes in encratite Judaeo-Christian circles see G. Quispel, in *Aspects du Judéo-Christianisme* (Paris, 1965), p. 41.

9) Compare in general H. von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Early Church* (London, 1968), pp. 90-122.

10) Cf. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism...*, I, p. 45 ff.; G. G. Blum, *Rabbula von Edessa* (C.S.C.O., Subsidia 34; 1969), pp. 99-100; J. M. Fiey, "Les Marcionites dans les textes historiques de l'église de Perse", *Le Muséon* lxxxiii (1970), pp. 183-8.

that Tatian's harmony of the Four Gospels, the Diatessaron, contained a number of modifications which he made so as to square the Gospel record with his own encratite views. Now one passage that greatly troubled the ascetically minded was that found in the Synoptic Gospels on the subject of John's food in the desert. John's life was, needless to say, regarded by the early church as the ideal which the ascetic should imitate, but the statement that he partook of meat—even in the form of locusts—evidently caused considerable scandal in certain circles, and we know of numerous attempts that were made to exonerate him of this apparent lapse. The majority of these explanations (which enjoyed a considerable vogue among Syriac writers eager to enhance his ascetic prowess¹¹) made John into a vegetarian, explaining the *akrides* of the Greek either as a plant name, or as a corruption of *akrodrua*, 'wild fruits'. Tatian, however, who was one of the first to tackle this problem, adopted a different solution, and it is fairly certain that in the Diatessaron John's diet was described as consisting of 'milk and honey'¹²): in other words, John, in his ascetic life, actually anticipated the diet commonly regarded as that of heaven—in the Christian context one need only recall that the newly baptised, who had thus become children of heaven, were given milk and honey, as symbols of the new heavenly life that they had just entered¹³). John's anticipation of the kingdom of heaven, as implied in the Diatessaron, is particularly interesting in the light of the Syriac understanding of Luke xx 35-6, a passage to which reference will very shortly be made.

The other subject on which the Gospels gave no explicit teaching was that of marriage. I say 'explicit' advisedly, for the early Syriac-speaking church thought otherwise. One passage in particular evidently caught their attention, and once again it is interesting to see the ascetic slant that Luke, alone of the Synoptics, provides¹⁴). The passage in question is Luke xx 35-6, with parallels in Matthew xx 30 and Mark xii 25.

11) See "The Baptist's diet in Syriac sources", *Oriens Christianus* liv (1970), pp. 113-24.

12) For details see "The Baptist's diet...", pp. 115-6. Other examples of encratite alterations made by Tatian in the Gospel text of the Diatessaron are given by Vööbus, *History of Asceticism...*, I, p. 40 f.

13) It might be noted that, according to Hippolytus (*Elenchus*, V. 8.30), the Naasenes made milk and honey the symbol of the food of the perfect.

14) The importance of this passage has rightly been stressed by P. Nagel, *Die Motivierung der Askese in der alten Kirche und der Ursprung des Mönchtums*, T.U. xcvi (1966), pp. 34 ff.

Jesus is answering the Saducees' query about resurrection, and in the course of Jesus' reply in Matthew and Mark we find the words: "At the resurrection men and women do not marry; they are like angels in heaven". In Luke, on the other hand, there is a significant difference: "Those who have been judged worthy of a place in the other world, and of the resurrection from the dead, do not marry, for they are not subject to death any longer. They are like angels; they are sons of God, because they share in the resurrection". In other words, the worthy *already* anticipate the marriageless life of angels *in this world* ¹⁵). The implications are even clearer in the Old Syriac translation of the passage: "Those who have become worthy to receive that world (i.e. the kingdom) and that resurrection from the dead, do not marry, nor can they die, for they have been made equal with the angels, (and being) the sons of the resurrection (they are) like the sons of God" ¹⁶).

Given a passage like this, it is easy to see why such stress was laid, in the early Syriac-speaking church, on the fact that the ladies in the very popular parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids were *parthenoi*, virgins. And it is interesting that both the Greek term, *parthenos*, and the Syriac equivalent, *bethula*, is very often found applied to men.

It is indeed well known that rigorist attitudes towards marriage were very common in many early Christian communities ¹⁷), but it is clear that one area where they were especially rife was that of Syria-Mesopotamia. In the second century marriage and procreation receive outright condemnation by Tatian ¹⁸), and similar attitudes can be seen in a

15) There is an interesting parallel here with the beliefs of the members of the Qumran community: by entry into the community a man becomes a partner with the angels in the service of God. This idea is clearly expressed in I Q S a II, 8: "The holy angels are present in their congregation", and in I Q Hodayot III, 19-23 (on this passage see especially M. Delcor, *Les Hymnes de Qumran* (Paris, 1962), pp. 126-7).

16) My translation differs on some points from that of F. C. Burkitt in *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe*. On the 'angelic life' of ascetics, see in general S. Frank, *Angelikos Bios* (Münster, 1964). From Syriac sources many examples can be found; here I cite only two: in the anonymous panegyric on Rabbula (ed. Overbeck, *Ephraemi Sancti... Opera Selecta*), p. 186¹⁵, the hero is described as "an angel of flesh" (cp. also p. 169^{20 ff.}), while in Jacob of Serug, *On virginity etc.* (ed. Overbeck, *op. cit.*), p. 387^{25 ff.}, the links between virginity, paradise and the life of angels are made particularly close. Cp. also p. 8, note 23 below.

17) E.g. K. Müller, "Die Forderung der Ehelosigkeit in der alten Kirche", in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (1930), pp. 63-79.

18) Cf. in general Vööbus, *History of Asceticism...*, I, pp. 35 ff.

large number of works by writers of similar geographical provenance, such as the two pseudo-Clementine epistles *de Virginitate*, surviving only in Syriac translation.

In some communities in the East views like these were held with such seriousness that celibacy was regarded as an essential condition for baptism. This seems to have obtained well into the third century as the normal practice in practically the whole area of the Syriac-speaking churches, although it hardly survived, except marginally, as late as the fourth century, as Burkitt claimed in his influential little book, *Early Eastern Christianity* 19).

In the early Syriac-speaking churches the term for the members of this baptised community of 'virgins', male and female, was "sons/daughters of the *Qeyāmā*". I leave the term untranslated for the moment, for its precise meaning is still very much disputed. Perhaps the most widely held view is that advocated by Vööbus 20) among others: *qeyāmā* is the equivalent of the Hebrew *berith*, that is 'covenant', 'pact', and so the *benai qeyāmā*, 'sons of the covenant', are "a group of persons who keep the vow or covenant", where the vow/covenant in question is presumably to be understood as the baptismal vow. By way of an aside it might be mentioned that Vööbus 21) and others have then gone on, tentatively, to suggest some historical link between the terminology of early Syriac-speaking Christianity and that of the Jewish Qumran community for whose members the concept of the *berith* was of particular importance. While this suggestion is indeed intriguing, it would seem that, whatever one thinks of this particular explanation of the Syriac *qeyāmā*, the evidence that has so far been

19) See A. Vööbus, *Celibacy, a Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951).

20) Vööbus, *History of Asceticism* . . . , I, pp. 97 ff; cf. also *Church History* xxx (1961), pp. 19-27. A survey of the different theories is also given by S. Jargy, "Les 'fils et filles du pacte' dans la littérature monastique syriaque", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* xvii (1951), pp. 304-20.

21) Vööbus, *op. cit.*, pp. 100 ff. In the Qumran texts the phrase most frequently found is *bāṣē ha-berith*, 'those who enter the covenant', while *benē ha-berith*, 'sons of the covenant', in fact does not occur at all, the nearest equivalent being *benē berithō*, 'sons of his covenant'. Elsewhere in Hellenistic Jewish literature the phrase 'sons of the covenant' is to be found in the *Psalms of Solomon* xvii 15, and *Jubilees* xv 26. In the latter, as sometimes in Rabbinic literature, the term is used in close connection with the idea of circumcision—a rite in Christianity replaced by baptism; in the light of this it is probably best to accept 'covenant' as the meaning of *qeyāmā*.

adduced for any *direct* links here with the Qumran community is so tenuous as to be really worthless. The matter cannot be taken further here, but reference should be made to an alternative, and at first sight very attractive, suggestion as to the real significance of the Syriac *qeyāmā*. This has recently been put forward by P. Nagel in his book *Die Motivierung der Askese in der alten Kirche und der Ursprung des Mönchtums* ²²). According to him, *qeyāmā* means, in this context, not 'covenant', 'stance', or any of the other meanings that have been adduced, but 'resurrection', and the *benai qeyāmā* are thus those who anticipate the resurrection while still in this life: they in fact correspond to the *isangeloi* ²³) of Luke xx 36, the passage to which attention was drawn earlier on. This explanation, at least in the form in which Nagel puts it ²⁴), unfortunately runs into linguistic difficulties, for *qeyāmā* (masculine emphatic) never seems to mean 'resurrection', and to explain it as the absolute form (also *qeyāmā*) of the feminine noun *qeyāmtā*, which does mean 'resurrection', is forced, and such a usage (i.e. construct + absolute) would be hard to parallel satisfactorily in Syriac.

One of the best mirrors in which to view the ascetic ideals of the early Christian communities is to be found in the apocryphal acts of the apostles, and what is probably the most fascinating of these documents, the *Acts of Thomas*, is very much the product of early Syriac-speaking Christianity. These Acts belong to the earliest group of the apocryphal acts of the apostles, and go back to the second century. The fact that the work was also popular among the Marcionites and Manichaeans ²⁵) guarantees its ascetic character: a very strict view is taken, for example, on the subject of marriage ²⁶). The basis of its teaching consists in the contrast between the corruptible body (not, however, in

²²) pp. 41 ff.

²³) Thus Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa* (P.G. lxxxii), § 4, calls the ascetic way of life ἡ ἀγγελικὴ πολιτεία, while Ephrem (ed. Zingerle, *Monumenta Syriaca*, I, p. 6 lines 127-8) says ascetics are "like the angels in heaven, although they themselves live on earth". Cp. also p. 6 note 16.

²⁴) The same objection does not apply to Adam's interpretation of the term („Grundbegriffe des Mönchtums in sprachlicher Sicht", *Z.K.G.* lxxv (1953/4), pp. 224-8), which served as a starting point for Nagel.

²⁵) Cf. A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 20-1.

²⁶) Likewise significantly water, not wine, is used for the eucharist (§ 121); according to Epiphanius (*Panarion* xlii.3.3) this was also Marcionite practice.

itself evil) and the soul, alone capable of incorruptibility. All that pertains to the body is to be rejected, on the grounds that such things, being corruptible, are liable to hinder the soul in attaining its goal of incorruptibility. The ascetic life thus becomes an essential step on the road to salvation. One striking feature of the *Acts of Thomas* is the frequency with which the terms 'stranger' and 'foreigner' are used of the Christian in this world, and this will be found to be an extremely common theme throughout Syriac-speaking Christianity. The concept will be based on Old Testament passages such as Psalm cxxxvii 4, referring to the exile of the Israelites as in 'a foreign land' (thence applied to the life of Christians in this world), or New Testament ones like Hebrews xi 13, where the great Old Testament figures, held up as models of faith, are described as having "confessed themselves no more than strangers and passing travellers on earth". This is a theme to which reference will be made again later on.

So far we have been dealing with tendencies among the early Christian communities of the general Syro-Mesopotamian area, and only very rarely for this period do we know the names of individual ascetics. For their heirs in the fourth century and later we are much better off: in Syriac we have a large number of important ascetic works by the great fourth century writers, Aphrahat and Ephrem. Aphrahat, whose 23 surviving *Demonstrations* were written between 337 and 345, represents Syriac-speaking Christianity in its purest form, virtually uncontaminated by Greek influence. His slightly younger contemporary, Ephrem, is one of the most prolific of Syriac writers, and his highly allusive, and apparently very verbose, style, has not won him the same reputation among modern scholars—at least in this country—that he once enjoyed in antiquity, although in fact he is a writer, and above all a poet, who, provided one takes the trouble to read him carefully and sympathetically, amply rewards the effort expended. To Ephrem we owe, not only a considerable number of poetical works on ascetic subjects, but also some hymn cycles on two individual ascetics, Julian Saba, whose death is independently recorded in the local Edessene Chronicle under the year 678 of the Seleucid era, = A.D. 366/7, and his almost exact contemporary, Abraham Quidunaya²⁷). But someone who prosaically wants to discover the details of the lives of these two

27) Ed. Lamy, *op. cit.* [p. 2 note 4], III, cols 749-836 (on Abraham), 837-936 (on Julian); cp. also Vööbus, *History of Asceticism...*, II, pp. 42-60.

ascetics would find a perusal of Ephrem's hymns on them a singularly unrewarding and frustrating task, and he would be well advised, in the case of Julian Saba, to turn to a much later, Greek, source, namely Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*, written in the mid fifth century. This is a document of very great interest, but one that has been curiously neglected by modern scholarship: there is no reliable edition of the Greek text, and most regrettably no English translation is available. The work²⁸) consists of a number of short biographies of local Syrian ascetics, and the first twenty chapters are devoted to hermits already dead by 437/449 when Theodoret was writing, and among these features (ch. 2) Julian Sabas. The remaining chapters, 21-30, on the other hand, concern hermits who were still alive at the time of writing. Those hermits and recluses who form the subject of chapters 14-25 all lived in the desert around Theodoret's own see of Cyrrhus, some 60 miles North East of Antioch.

Some individual ascetics are extremely well documented, and here I am thinking in particular of the most famous of all Syrian ascetics, St. Simeon Stylites, to whom we shall be returning later.

A work of major importance for the history of asceticism in the early Syriac speaking church is Aphrahat's sixth *Demonstration*²⁹), written in 337. Aphrahat's views on the ascetic life can be neatly summed up in two short quotations:

"We should be aliens from this world, just as Christ did not belong to this world" (col. 241^{16f}).

"Whoever would resemble the angels, must alienate himself from men" (col. 248²⁵).

This stress on alienation³⁰)—separation from the world—in fact provides a clue to an understanding of the preoccupation of the early Syriac-speaking church with the ideal of virginity. In Aphrahat's terminology 'virginity' is almost synonymous with 'holiness', though the two terms, which basically have the same idea of continence, are in fact

28) P.G. lxxxii, cols. 1283-1496.

29) Ed. (with Latin translation) in *Patrologia Syriaca* I, cols. 239-312 (English translation in *Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ser. II, vol. 13).

30) Compare the popular ideal of the Christian as ξένος, 'stranger' (see, for example, Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, p. 166). Isaac of Antioch (ed. Bedjan, I p. 42¹⁶) holds up the apostles as models of vagrancy.

used for two different categories of persons—‘virgins’ referring to ascetics who have never married, while *qaddishē*, ‘holy ones’, to couples who are married, but who have then agreed to adopt the ascetic life of complete continence. At first sight it is a little surprising that the word for ‘holy’ should have taken on this specialised meaning, but it should be remembered that in the Semitic languages the root *qdš* has the basic connotation of separateness, and so the holy man, the *qaddishā*, is someone apart from his surroundings, someone who has alienated himself to, and is untouched by, the world he lives in. In the light of this it is not difficult to see how the term ‘virginity’ was adopted, not only as an ideal in the literal sense, but also as a term that could be used in a symbolic way in connection with someone who had preserved himself uncontaminated by the exterior world as a whole. Needless to say there is no great jump from this sort of attitude to the world to a completely dualistic one, and it will be recalled how popular openly dualistic systems, such as those of the Marcionites and the Manichaeans, were in the Syro-Mesopotamian area.

As was pointed out before, Aphrahat represents Syriac Christianity completely untouched by western influences. He indeed knows of ‘monks’, but the term he uses does not mean ‘monk’ in the later sense of the word with which we are familiar: his ‘monks’ are ascetics living either individually or in small groups. Ephrem too probably represents a pure form of Syriac Christianity, at least as far as his Nisibis period is concerned ³¹). During the last ten odd years of his life, however, 363-73, which he spent in Edessa, he probably came into contact with representatives of Egyptian monasticism, although none of the works attributed to Ephrem which actually refer to cenobitic monasticism seem to be genuine ³²). The picture one gets of the life of the ascetic from Ephrem’s genuine works is a remarkable one ³³): the ascetic lives in the desert or in the mountains like a wild animal, totally untouched by any of the appurtenances of civilisation, which is regarded as the

31) Cf. E. Beck, “Ascétisme et monachisme chez Saint Éphrem”, *L’Orient Syrien* iii (1958), pp. 273-98; „Zur Terminologie des ältesten syrischen Mönchtums”, *Studia Anselmiana* xxxviii (1956), pp. 254-67.

32) Cf. Vööbus, *Literary Critical and Historical Studies in Ephrem the Syrian*, pp. 96 ff.

33) Cf. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism...*, II, p. 26 f.; *Literary Critical and Historical Studies...*, pp. 94-11; “Monachisme primitif dans les écrits d’Éphrem le Syrien”, *L’Orient Syrien* iv (1959), pp. 299-306.

work of Satan. He lives out in the open, completely exposed to the elements and extremes of heat and cold; he eats roots and wild fruits ³⁴), his clothing—that is, if he had any at all, and many had not ³⁵)—consisted of straw or leaves tied together; his hair was so shaggy ³⁶), and his nails so long that he resembled a bird of prey more than a human being. This type of life—which, incidentally, was not confined to Christian ascetics in this area ³⁷)—was in fact a return to the status of primeval man ³⁸), or, in Christian terms, to the life of Adam in Paradise before the Fall: the ascetic was thus entirely free to be in perpetual conversation with God, while he was in complete peace and harmony with his sole companions, the wild animals.

The general impressions that one gets from Ephrem of the life of these extreme, and highly individualistic, ascetics of the Syrian deserts are readily confirmed on turning to the straight-forward accounts of their lives in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*. And one thing that immediately strikes the reader of this work are the extravagancies in which these Syrian ascetics indulged. Like the ascetics described in general terms by Ephrem, the subjects of Theodoret's short biographies completely reject anything to do with civilized life—fire, clothing, any sort of dwelling ³⁹). But from Theodoret we also learn details of the artificial mortifications they imposed on themselves, not content with those imposed upon them by their wild surroundings. We find them chaining themselves to rocks (the use of chains is particularly common in Syria), or yoking their necks to heavy weights, or having themselves bricked up in caves or cells, or imprisoned in cages. From sources other

34) E.g. an unpublished text quoted by Vööbus, *Literary Critical and Historical Studies*..., p. 82, note 9: "They graze like wild animals off plants in the mountains".

35) See especially P. Zingerle, *Monumenta Syriaca* I, p. 5, line 88.

36) E.g. Lamy, *op. cit.* [p. 2, note 4] IV, col. 153/4: "Your hair has grown long like an eagle's" (based on Daniel iv 33). Later, when ascetics came under ecclesiastical control, rules were promulgated forbidding them to grow their hair long; cf. Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism* (Stockholm, 1960), p. 28 (no. 5).

37) E.g. Lucian, *Mennipos* (Teubner edn., I, p. 195). Cf. also L. Bieler, *Theios Aner* (repr. Darmstadt, 1967), pp. 61 ff. Some pagan testimonia on asceticism are collected by H. Koch, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Askese und des Mönchtums in der alten Kirche* (Tübingen, 1933), texts 1-19.

38) Cf. J. Haussleiter, *Der Vegetarismus in der Antike* (Berlin, 1935), p. 67.

39) In general see A. M. J. Festugière, *Antioche païenne et chrétienne* (Paris, 1959), ch. ix, 'Traits caractéristiques de l'anchorétisme syrien'.

than Theodoret we even hear of ascetics who threw themselves into the fire ⁴⁰), or into the mouths of wild beasts, presumably thus seeking to reproduce the fates of the martyrs before them.

These extravagancies are in complete contrast to the situation in Egypt, where it is the exception to find the use of such things as chains. Whereas Egypt's *forte* was cenobitic monasticism, in Syria it was the solitary virtuoso who dominated the scene, and it is to the most famous of these, Saint Simeon Stylites, that we shall now turn.

Besides being the best known of the Syrian ascetics, Simeon also happens to be one of the best documented ⁴¹). Theodoret's section (§ 26) on him was written while the saint was still alive, and it constitutes an excellent eyewitness account of the man ⁴²). In Syriac we have an important life of the saint, written soon after his death, and the product of his monastery at Telneshin ⁴³). Another, Greek, life also survives, attributed to a certain Anthony ⁴⁴), but the value of this has been seriously disputed, notably by the great Bollandist, Paul Peeters ⁴⁵). In point of fact, however, the Anthony life probably does have an independent value of its own, and some incidents recorded in it appear in a far less legendary form than they do in the Syriac life ⁴⁶).

Simeon must have been born about 389, of Christian parents, and he was baptised as a child. His father's occupation is not known, but he was a man of some property at any rate, for he owned flocks, which Simeon tended in his youth. Simeon himself seems to have had no formal education, and he remained illiterate all his life; his native

40) Cf. *Ephraemi Syri Sermones Duo* (ed. P. Zingerle; Brixen, 1868), p. 20.

41) Well summarised in Festugière, *op. cit.*, pp. 347 ff., and in Vööbus, *History of Asceticism* . . . , II, pp. 208 ff.; the basic study is still that of H. Lietzmann, *Das Leben des heiligen Symeon Stylites* (Texte und Untersuchungen xxxii, 4; 1908).

42) Critical edition of the Greek text in Lietzmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-18; French translation in Festugière, *op. cit.*, pp. 388 ff.

43) Two recensions are available in print (an English translation of the text edited by Bedjan was made by F. Lent, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* xxxv (1915/7), pp. 103-98, and a German one by Hilgenfeld, in Lietzmann, *op. cit.*; French summary in Festugière, *op. cit.*, pp. 357 ff.

44) Ed. Lietzmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-78; French summary in Festugière *op. cit.*, pp. 370 ff.

45) „St. Syméon Stylite et ses premiers biographes”, *Analecta Bollandiana* lxi (1943), pp. 29-71 = *Le tréfonds oriental de l'hagiographie byzantine* (Brussels, 1950), pp. 92-136.

46) There are also lives in Coptic (ed. Chainé, 1948) and in Georgian (ed. Garitte, 1957).

language was Syriac. He must have been in his 'teens when he was converted to the religious life, and significantly enough this took place, according to Theodoret, on his hearing the Beatitudes read in church. Probably about 403⁴⁷⁾ he entered the monastery of Eusebona, by the village of Tell 'Adā, some 35 miles ENE of Antioch. He remained there for nearly ten years, but his extreme ascetic practices, despite his efforts to hide them, became known and failed to endear him to his fellow monks. Perhaps about 412 he finally left the monastery at Tell 'Adā and removed himself to the vicinity of Telneshin (Greek Telanissos), several miles to the north, where he was to spend the remaining forty-seven odd years of his life.

One of the almost inevitable consequences of a life of extreme penance and mortification such as Simeon's was the publicity it attracted; in time there would be a continuous crowd of pilgrims and sightseers, who had come to have their sick healed, to ask his advice on almost every subject under the sun, to lay their grievances before him, or merely just to touch the holy man, and if possible to get a souvenir of one of the hairs from his shirt, or the suchlike. It would appear that the Syrian ascetics calmly accepted these crowds as yet another form of mortification, and in this connection Theodoret has a particularly delightful section (§ 19) on another ascetic, named Salamanes, which serves as a good example of the complete *apatheia*, impassivity, of these ascetics.

Salamanes left his own village of Kefarsana in quest of "the quiet life", and for this purpose he settled in a deserted hut in a neighbouring village, across the river. Here he walled himself up, leaving neither window nor door. He received a yearly ration of food, which was conveyed to him by means of a tunnel dug under the wall. The local bishop, learning of his reputation for sanctity, decided to ordain him to the priesthood. To enter the saint's cell and perform the ceremony he had to pull down part of the wall. Salamanes, however, remained totally impervious to what was happening to him, and after the ceremony the bishop failed to get a single word out of him, and so he had no alternative but to leave and repair the breach he had made in the wall on entry. Later on, the men of Salamanes' village of origin, jealous that another village should boast the presence of an ascetic who did not

47) The details of the chronology of his life are uncertain owing to the conflicting evidence of the sources.

really belong to them, made a raid one night, pulled down the hut, and transported the ascetic to the other side of the river, to their own village, where they built him a new hut the next morning, the saint in the meanwhile showing not the slightest concern at what was going on. A few days later the rival villagers made a return raid and recaptured the saint. At this point Theodoret breaks off, and admiringly comments on the saint's success in showing himself dead to the world.

Unlike Salamanes Simeon had made no vow of silence, and he seems to have had an ever increasing number of visitors, and the pages of the Syriac life are full of instances of miraculous healings effected by him on their behalf. As his fame spread the crowds became intolerable, and just as, in the Gospels, Jesus had retired to a boat to avoid the throng of the crowds, Simeon too found a simple answer to the same problem: it was to mount a column. At first it was of no great height, but with the passing of the years the column was gradually raised until it reached a height of forty cubits, and on this last column he spent the final thirty years of his life.

The novelty of this way of life clearly led to a good deal of criticism from certain quarters, and we are told that when some Egyptian monks first heard of Simeon's exploits they excommunicated him, although later on a good relationship was restored ^{47a}). Also it is significant that both Theodoret and the author of the Syriac panegyric felt it necessary to provide an apologia for Simeon's stylite life. The two apologies are in fact curiously similar, and it would seem that they both represent the arguments brought forward in Simeon's defence by the monks of his monastery at Telanissos. The arguments themselves almost entirely consist of a parade of biblical precedents for similar extravagant actions on the part of the Old Testament prophets.

But admirers easily outnumbered critics, and visitors came to see him from far and wide—not just people from the confines of the Roman Empire, writes Theodoret (§ 11), but Ishmailites, Persians, Armenians, Iberians, Homerites from the east, and from the farthest west, Spaniards, Britons and Celts. Although Simeon spent most of the day and night in prayer (spectators used to count the number of prostrations he made to while away the time), he regularly spared the latter half of the afternoon, from about 3 pm until sunset, to attend to his visitors.

^{47a}) Evagrius, *H.E.* i, 13.

These ranged from simple peasants to high dignitaries, and it is clear that one of the most important social roles of ascetics such as Simeon was to serve as arbitrators to the society from which they themselves had withdrawn ⁴⁸). But not only did Simeon himself give advice, but his name too was used as a tool in political and ecclesiastical disputes. Curiously, however, we do not know for certain what was his attitude over the Council of Chalcedon, which met eight years previous to his death; one can hardly imagine that his views on this were not sought at some time or other ⁴⁹). Perhaps, like the Delphic Oracle, he shrewdly left his replies ambiguous ⁵⁰).

Although he spent his life on top of his column completely exposed to the elements, Simeon's body survived this treatment for a surprising number of years, and, indeed, Delehayé justly remarks on the longevity of stylites in general ⁵¹). Simeon's death, preceded by a short illness, was probably undramatic ⁵²): only after a day or two did his disciples realize that his accustomed motionlessness was not that of prayer, and only then did one of them climb up the ladder to confirm that he was dead. His body was transported in great pomp (and with a strong military escort, to prevent any attempts to snatch it away) to Antioch, recently devastated by a serious earthquake. In death the saint was even less safe than he was in life from the attention of pilgrims, eager for relics, and the various parts of his body eventually ended up in a large number of different places ⁵³).

What had started out as a practical means of avoiding the press of the crowds eventually ended up by becoming a separate mode of

48) See in general P. Brown, "The role of the holy man in early Byzantine society", forthcoming in *Journal of Roman Studies*; cf. also Vööbus, *History of Asceticism* . . . , II, pp. 377 ff.

49) Both sides claimed his support: Evagrius (*H.E.* ii, 10) quotes a letter attributed to Simeon that supports the council, while in Syriac there are several anti-Chalcedonian letters claiming his authorship (edited, with English translation, by C. C. Torrey, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* xx (1899), pp. 253-76; German translation in Lietzmann, *op. cit.*, p. 188-92).

50) In the sixth century the Chalcedonians made great efforts to win over certain in stylites to their cause—without success, according to John of Ephesus, *Lives of Eastern Saints (Patrologia Orientalis* xvii, p. 98).

51) *Les saints stylites* (Brussels, 1923), p. cxliv.

52) The following is based on the account in the life of Antony.

53) For modern Greek claims, for example, see O. Meinardus, "A study of the relics of Saints of the Greek Orthodox Church", *Oriens Christianus* liv (1970), pp. 247-8.

monastic life ^{53a}). Stylites sprang up all over the place, and special rules were even drawn up for them ⁵⁴). Some of these men, like St. Simeon the younger in the sixth century, who took up residence on Mons Admirabilis, between Antioch and the sea, are well known, while others, such as Joshua the Stylite, accredited with an important Syriac chronicle covering the years 494-506, or John the Stylite, a correspondent of the seventh century writer and polymath, Jacob of Edessa, are to-day little more than mere names. Delehaye, in his book *Les Saints Stylites*, had no difficulty in finding instances of medieval stylites, and was even able to adduce a couple of nineteenth century examples.

The magnificent church and monastery that sprung up on the site of Simeon's pillar still survive, remarkably well preserved ⁵⁵). It was no doubt buildings such as these that another Syriac writer, Isaac of Antioch, had in mind when he complained ⁵⁶):

"They (*sc.* the monks) have deserted the (spiritual) heights, and have plumbed the depths with their many grandiose building activities".

Isaac, who perhaps belongs to the late fifth, or early sixth, century, represents the yearning that many felt for the traditional individualistic type of Syrian asceticism, once the more organised cenobitic monasticism had become established in Syria. To Isaac the agricultural and commercial activities of the large new monasteries that were springing up in his day represented a denial of the true ideals of the ascetic life, which in his eyes should be completely cut off from all ties with this world. 'The sun blushed, he writes ⁵⁷), to see monks who had turned into merchants'. The old ideals were indeed continued, despite attempts

53a) It is most unlikely that Simeon's stylite life had any connection with the practice of the pagan priests at Hierapolis/Mabbug, as described in Lucian's *De Dea Syra*.

54) Thus some of Jacob of Edessa's *Canons* are specifically aimed at stylites: Vööbus, *Documents...*, p. 95 (no. 2), 96 (no. 9). Simeon himself is accredited with some 'rules', cf. Vööbus, *Syrische Kanonssammlungen* (C.S.C.O., Subsidia 35; 1970), pp. 138 ff.

55) Cf. J. Lassus, *Sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie* (Paris, 1947), pp. 129-32, and especially G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord* (Paris, 1953), I, pp. 223-76. For the later history of the monastery see J. Nasrallah, "Le couvent de Saint-Siméon l'Alépin", *Parole de l'Orient* 1 (1970), pp. 327-56.

56) Ed. Bedjan, I, p. 29⁹.

57) Ed. Bedjan, I, p. 41⁶. The same attitude is nicely illustrated in the gentle rebuke a nameless ascetic administered to John of Ephesus (*Lives of the Eastern Saints*, *Patrologia Orientalis* xvii, pp. 257-8).

on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities to bring its practicers under their control, but usually it was only among fringe groups like the Audians and Messalians, regarded by the authorities as heretical⁵⁸).

Reading the various sources for Simeon's life, one cannot help being struck by the man's simplicity and obvious holiness. He is a figure, who, while foreign to us who are heirs of western Christianity, is less unfamiliar in the context of eastern tradition, where one might compare him with some of the famous holy men of nineteenth century Russia, such as St. Serafim of Sarov. Far from being a useless member of the society from which he had so completely alienated himself, the ascetic eventually serves that same society in his new role as *pneumatophoros*. The ascetic, like the martyr before him, is essentially regarded as the successor to the biblical prophets, and it is significant that the justification that the monks of Telanissos offered for Simeon's way of life consisted simply in adducing the examples of the Old Testament prophets.

The Syriac panegyric calls Simeon the 'head of the mourners' (*abîlē*, the term is derived from the Beatitudes), and this may help us to understand something of the motivation that lies behind the extraordinary lives of men such as Simeon. Theirs was a life of mourning, not just for their own sins, but also for those of mankind in general. Asceticism has in fact thus become an 'instrumentum satisfactionis'⁵⁹): it is a means of regaining paradise. But this is of course only one aspect of the matter, and the 'mourning' also consists in mourning for, and participating in, the sufferings of Christ. Thus, in the writings of Aphrahat the 'imitation of Christ' consists primarily in a participation in his sufferings⁶⁰), and the same idea is very prominent in Ephrem's ascetic works: to 'take up the cross' means sharing in Christ's suffering and passion by means of mortification and ascetic practice. "If you truly belong to Christ, writes Ephrem⁶¹), you must clothe yourself in his passion". This emphasis on the suffering that a true Christian must bear is already found in one of Tatian's additions, in his Diatessaron, to the traditional Gospel text: at Matthew xix 21 (and parallels), to the

58) Cf. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism* . . . , II, pp. 123 ff.

59) Nagel, *op. cit.*, p. 62. Cf. H. Musurillo in *Traditio* xii (1956), pp. 23-4.

60) E.g. *Demonstration* vi, (*Patrologia Syriaca* I), col. 241²²: "Let us share in (Christ's) suffering, for thus we shall live (i.e. be saved) at his resurrection".

61) Lamy, *op. cit.*, IV, col. 171. On this theme in Ephrem see in general Vööbus, *Literary Critical and Historical Studies* . . . , pp. 104-5.

words "if you would be perfect, go and sell what you possess", Tatian characteristically added "and take your cross and come after me" ⁶²). This concept of the cross of suffering to be borne by every would-be follower of Christ is clearly a fundamental one in the Syrian tradition, and it is only through a realisation of this that one can hope to understand something of the motivation behind these extraordinary athletes of the ascetic life.

Theodoret ended his life of Simeon by saying that all he had done was to provide 'a mere drop', which, however, he hoped might give some indication of the 'rain' as it actually was. In drawing to a close I should like to borrow his words, pointing out that numerous facets of this intriguing subject have necessarily had to be passed over in silence, and that what has been described does no more than give a few of the main outlines.

62) Cf. Vööbus, *Studies in the History of the Gospel Text in Syriac* (C.S.C.O., Subsidia; 1951), p. 200. In a similar vein Ephrem expands Matthew x 39 (and parallels): "Everyone who seeks to find his soul shall lose it here in *afflictions*" (Zingerle, *Monumenta Syriaca* I, p. 7, lines 181-2).